

## Nestorius of Constantinople, *Three Letters to Celestine of Rome*

*Introduction and Translation of First Letter by Matthew R. Crawford  
Translation of Second and Third Letters by Mark DelCogliano*

### INTRODUCTION

The three letters that follow highlight the fact that the Nestorian controversy had as much to do with ecclesiastical politics as it did with theological debate. Indeed, these letters, despite their brevity, illustrate one of the main reasons why Nestorius lost his struggle against the bishop of Alexandria, namely, his failure to draw Bishop Celestine of Rome to his cause. The primary purpose of the first letter, probably written in late 429, was to seek from Celestine information about several clerical exiles who had come to Constantinople from the West. These bishops, including most prominently Julian of Eclanum, had, as a result of the efforts of Augustine of Hippo, been deposed for adhering to the views of Pelagius regarding sin and salvation. Nestorius's report to Celestine in the first letter hints at his intention to reopen their case, an action that he should have realized the bishop of Rome would not look kindly upon. This intention becomes more explicit in the second letter, written perhaps in early 430, as Nestorius complains of the lack of response from the Roman leader and insists that Celestine send him the dossiers used in the deposition of the Pelagian bishops.

This strategy was bound to fail. Presumably Nestorius was operating on the basis of the new status granted to the church of Constantinople at the council of 381, as possessing an “honor” second only to that of Rome, since the Eastern capital was a “second Rome.” Celestine, however, would never have allowed his canonical decisions to be reconsidered by his Constantinopolitan counterpart. Moreover, the churches of Alexandria and of Rome had long been allies in theological controversies, stretching back at least to the 340s when Athanasius had fled to Rome in exile, so Celestine

was, from the outset, more likely to side with Cyril than with the upstart Nestorius in Constantinople.

In the first and second letters Nestorius provides vague reports about his own struggle against the “heresy” he had discovered in Constantinople, not mentioning Cyril at all. Shortly after he took up his post in 428 a controversy erupted in the capital over whether it was proper to call Mary Theotokos, meaning that she is “God-bearer,” or Anthropotokos, meaning “bearer of the human being.” In the first letter to Celestine Nestorius suggests that those who use Theotokos adhere to some kind of “blending” of the humanity and divinity in Christ, which, he asserts, smacks of the fourth-century heresies of Arianism and Apollinarianism. At the end of the letter, almost as an afterthought, he concedes that the term could have an orthodox interpretation. Still, Nestorius seems to think it best avoided, since as he argues, “no one gives birth to someone older than herself,” a line that would be sharply criticized by John Cassian, who prepared an assessment of Nestorius’s Christology on behalf of the Roman see.<sup>1</sup> In light of this principle, Nestorius views the term Theotokos as “inferior” to the term Christotokos (“Christ-bearer”), which he prefers as a more accurate appellation for the Virgin since it avoided heretical extremes on both sides. In the second letter another common Nestorian theme emerges, namely that the humanity and the divinity of Christ are each worshiped or adored distinctly, though in unison or “together,” a manner of speaking which Cyril attacked as necessarily implying a dual subjectivity.

The third letter is revealing of the state of Nestorius’s mind in the run-up to the council in 431. In this letter he quietly drops all mention of the Pelagian bishops, and focuses entirely on his controversy with Cyril, presenting the debate over the term Theotokos as an attempt by his Alexandrian foe to draw attention away from the accusations being made against him. Accordingly, he tells Celestine that the primary purpose of the forthcoming ecumenical council is to assess these complaints brought against Cyril. Perhaps by this point Nestorius had become aware that Cyril was having success in his dealings with Celestine in contrast to the silence he had so far had to endure from the bishop of Rome. Whatever the case, it is clear that when he penned this letter he realized that his best chance of victory

<sup>1</sup> John Cassian, *On the Incarnation* 2.2.1, 4.2.2, 5.1.3, and 7.2.1. Section 5.1.3 is translated in this volume on pp. 618–619.

in the widening conflict lay in his proximity to Emperor Theodosius II and in the council the emperor would soon summon.

This letter too, however, would go unanswered, as had the previous two. The first communication Nestorius would receive from Celestine was a letter dated August 10, 430, giving him ten days to recant his heretical views and comply with the faith set forth by the churches of Rome and Alexandria.<sup>2</sup> In it Celestine claimed that the reason Nestorius's letters had gone unanswered was because he had sent them in Greek, without having them first translated into Latin. Given the improbability that there was no one in Rome who could have translated the letters for Celestine, this claim only further illustrates the annoyance, and perhaps offense, that these letters aroused in him.

The original Greek versions of these letters are lost, but a fifth-century Latin translation survives. The translations here are based on the critical Latin text established by Eduard Schwartz, *Concilium Universale Ephesenum*, ACO 1.2 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1925–1926), 12–15 and ACO 1.5 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1924–1926), 182. Reference has also been made to the edition of Friedrich Loofs, *Nestorian: Die Fragmente des Nestorius* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1905), 165–172 and 181–182.

## TRANSLATION

### First Letter to Celestine

1. We owe to each other brotherly dialogue, so that, with harmony prevailing between us in <a brotherly spirit>,<sup>3</sup> we might fight together against the devil, the enemy of peace. Why this preface? A certain Julian, Florus, Orontius, and Fabius, calling themselves bishops of the western regions, have frequently approached the most pious and most commendable emperor<sup>4</sup> and bewailed their situation, claiming that they are orthodox persons suffering persecution during these orthodox times. They have frequently made the same claim in our presence and have frequently been turned away, but they have not ceased making the same claim and continue day after day to fill the ears of everyone with tearful cries. We have replied to them using appropriate words, even while being ignorant of what is true and credible in their affair. But since we are in need of more explicit

<sup>2</sup> ACO 1.1.2: 7–12 Schwartz.

<sup>3</sup> This is Schwartz's proposed supplement to fill a small lacuna in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Theodosius II.

information about their cases, lest our most pious and most Christian emperor have to endure repeated annoyance from these persons, and lest we, in ignorance of their cases, be pulled in two ways over the prosecution of the case, please deem us worthy to receive information about them. Otherwise certain persons might, in ignorance of true justice, cause trouble by showing them inappropriate compassion, or judge the canonical displeasure of Your Beatitude,<sup>5</sup> which was presumably sanctioned against them for heretical worship, to be something other than what it is. For the novelty of heresies calls for prosecution by true pastors.

2. This is the reason why, when we ourselves too had discovered no small amount of corruption of orthodoxy among certain persons here, day after day we made use of both anger and gentleness with those sick persons. For the sickness is not insignificant, but is related to the putrefaction of Apollinarius and Arius. For it is constantly muddling the Lord's appearance as a human being, resulting in some kind of confused blending, to such a degree that even certain clerics among us – some from inexperience, others from heretical deceit previously concealed within themselves (such as often happened also in the times of the apostles) – are sick like the heretics and openly blaspheme God the Word, who is same-in-substance with the Father, supposing that he received the beginning of his origin from the Christotokos Virgin, was fashioned along with his temple, and was buried with the flesh. And they say that after the resurrection his flesh did not remain flesh, but turned into the nature of the divinity. To be brief, they assign to the divinity of the Only-Begotten the same origin as that of the flesh that is conjoined with it and say it died along with the flesh. Moreover, they blasphemously claim that the flesh conjoined to the divinity turned into the divinity by means of the divinizing Word, which is nothing other than to destroy both. But they even had the audacity to treat the Christotokos Virgin as somehow divine along with God. For they have no qualms about calling her “Theotokos,” even though those holy fathers at Nicaea who surpass all praise said nothing more about the holy Virgin than “our Lord Jesus Christ became incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.”<sup>6</sup> And I pass over in silence the

<sup>5</sup> Schwartz detects a small lacuna in the text here, but sense can be made of the wording without an addition.

<sup>6</sup> Note that Nestorius cites a version of the Nicene Creed that accords with the one put forward at the Council of Constantinople in 381 rather than that from Nicaea in 325 which did not include the phrase “from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.”

scriptures, which everywhere, both through angels and through apostles, proclaim that the Virgin is the mother of Christ, not of God the Word.

I suspect that a previous report has already informed Your Beatitude of the sort of conflicts we have endured for these matters. And you have heard too that our conflicts have not been in vain. For many of those who had been corrupted and separated from us have, by the grace of the Lord, been set aright, because,<sup>7</sup> properly speaking, that which is born is same-in-substance with the one who gave it birth, while that to which the Lord's appearance as a human being was entrusted is the creature of the Lord's humanity, which is conjoined to God [and which came] from the Virgin through the Spirit. Moreover, if someone suggests that the name "Theotokos" is used on account of the humanity that was born and is conjoined to God the Word, and not on account of the one who gave it birth, we reply that this term is inappropriate for her who gave birth. For a true mother must be of the same substance as that which is born from her. Nevertheless, this term can be allowed in light of the following consideration, namely, that this name is only given to the Virgin on account of the inseparable temple of God the Word that came from her, and not because she herself is the mother of God the Word. For no one gives birth to someone older than herself.<sup>8</sup>

3. I suspect that the earlier report has already informed you about these matters, but nevertheless we ourselves have recounted the events that have transpired, in order to show by [explaining] these matters that we wish to be informed about the case of the aforementioned persons<sup>9</sup> in a brotherly spirit rather than out of a desire born of crass curiosity, especially since we relate our affairs as brothers to brothers, disclosing to one another the truth about the heresies, so that the opening of my letter may be as true as can be. For when I began this letter I said we owe to each other brotherly dialogue. I and those who are with me send greetings to all the brothers in Christ who are with you.

<sup>7</sup> Schwartz detected a lacuna here. He is certainly correct that it is an odd transition. He proposed that the omitted text said something like, "we refuse to use the word Theotokos with respect to the holy Virgin, for ..." But sense can be made of the text without any addition.

<sup>8</sup> The last sentence of this paragraph is quoted several times in John Cassian, *On the Incarnation*, including at 5.1.3, which is translated in this volume on pp. 618–619.

<sup>9</sup> That is, the Pelagian exiles from the West.

## Second Letter to Celestine

1. I have often written to Your Beatitude on account of Julian, Orontius, and the others, who have usurped for themselves episcopal dignity, and made frequent appearances before the most pious and the most commendable emperor, and prostrated themselves in our presence with repeated lamentations, claiming that they were expelled from the West in orthodox times. But we still have not received from Your Worship any writings about them. If I had such documents, I would be able to respond to them and give a brief response to their weeping. As things stand, apart from the uncertain things they say, there is nothing to which one might turn, with some people calling them heretics and saying that for this reason they were expelled from the western regions, while they themselves swear that they are the targets of false accusations and have endured this trial for the sake of the orthodox faith as a result of surreptitious activity. Our lack of information about them is thus a heavy burden, whether their account is true or not. For it is a crime to commiserate with them if they are truly heretics, but it is harsh and impious not to commiserate with them if they are the targets of false accusations. Therefore, let Your Soul, most beloved by God, please deem us worthy to be informed [about them], since we are still pulled in two ways by the weight of each impulse, that is, toward hating them and having mercy on them. For we wish to learn what opinion we should hold about them. For day after day we defer giving a response to these men, disguising the fact that we still hope and wait on Your Beatitude.

2. For, as Your Supreme Worship knows, this is not an insignificant investigation of a pious faction, nor is the examination of those who do this a trifling matter. For we are also expending much energy here, striving to root out from the church of God that utterly foul impiety of the most harmful opinion of Apollinarius and Arius. For I do not know how some ecclesiastical persons have become diseased with the sickness of the aforementioned heretics, on account of their acceptance of a certain idea that the divinity and humanity of the Only-Begotten are blended. These heretics both have the audacity to make the bodily passions pour over into the divinity of the Only-Begotten and pretend that the divine immutability has turned into the bodily nature. They confuse both natures through the mutability that arises through the blending, even though both natures are adored through an unconfused conjunction of the highest sort in the single person of the Only-Begotten. Blind men! They do not remember the

exposition of those holy fathers that explicitly contradicts them: “We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.”<sup>10</sup> For this statement [is made] with the title which signifies both natures, that is, Christ and <...><sup>11</sup> same-in-substance with the divinity of the Father. But the humanity born in these latter times is from the holy Virgin; on account of its conjunction with the divinity, the humanity is worshiped by angels and humans together with [the divinity].

3. So then, have regard for the one here who is wearied by so many labors on behalf of doctrinal purity<sup>12</sup> and consider what he will unavoidably suffer again, if he should remain uninformed about the case of the people mentioned above and greatly afraid that out of ignorance he might make still more heretics in addition to those described here. Therefore, I ask that Your Holy Soul be diligent in every respect in giving information about the people mentioned above, especially since the most loyal carrier of the letter, the *cubicularius* Valerius, can give to Your Beatitude an explicit account of how they vex. I and those who are with me send the greatest number of greetings to all the brothers in Christ who are with you.

### Third Letter to Celestine

I have learned that Cyril, the most distinguished bishop of the city of Alexandria, has been struck with terror because of the written complaints against him, which we have received, and is now hunting for subterfuges to avoid a holy synod taking place on account of these written complaints. In the meantime, he is devising some other subterfuges, namely, frivolous disturbances over terminology. He has fixed upon the terms “Theotokos” and “Christotokos” – the first he allows, but as for “Christotokos,” sometimes he removes it from the gospels, and again sometimes he allows it, on the basis of what I believe is a kind of excessive prudence. In the case of the term “Theotokos,” I am not opposed to those who want to say it, unless it should contribute to the confusion of natures in the manner of

<sup>10</sup> This is a quotation from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381. Schwartz posits a small lacuna after it, but this seems unnecessary.

<sup>11</sup> There is a small lacuna in the text here.

<sup>12</sup> Here Schwartz’s edition is followed, which reads *propter sectarum puritatem*. Loofs’s edition reads *propter sectarum pravitatem*, which would be translated, “on account of heretical depravity.”

the madness of Apollinarius or Arius. Nonetheless, I have no doubt that the term “Theotokos” is inferior to the term “Christotokos,” as the latter is mentioned by the angels and the gospels. And if I were not speaking to Your Worship who is already so knowledgeable, I would need to give a very long discourse on this topic. But even without a discourse, it is known in every way to Your Beatitude that if we should judge that there are two heresies opposed to each other, the one using only the term “Theotokos,” the other only “Anthropotokos,” and each heresy draws [others] to what it confesses or, if they have not accomplished this, puts itself at risk of falling away from the church, it would be necessary to assign someone to such an affair should it arise. This person would exercise concern for both heresies and heal the danger of both parties by means of the term taken from the gospels that signifies both natures. For as I said, the term “Christotokos” *<avoids>*<sup>13</sup> the assertion of both parties,<sup>14</sup> because it both removes the blasphemy of Paul of Samosata,<sup>15</sup> who claimed that Christ the Lord of all was simply a human being, and also it puts to flight the wickedness of both Arius and Apollinarius. Now I have also written these very things to the most distinguished bishop of Alexandria, as Your Beatitude can tell from the copies I have attached to this letter of mine, as well as from the copies of what he wrote to us.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, with God’s help it has also been agreed to announce a mandatory worldwide synod for the investigation into the other ecclesiastical matters.<sup>17</sup> For I do not think it will be difficult to investigate an uncertainty over words, and it is not a hindrance for a discussion of the divinity of Christ the Lord.

<sup>13</sup> This is Schwartz’s proposed supplement to fill a small lacuna in the text.

<sup>14</sup> That is, advocates of Theotokos and adherents of Anthropotokos.

<sup>15</sup> On Paul of Samosata, see his *Selected Fragments*, translated in this volume on

pp. 197–211. Eusebius of Dorylaeum links Nestorius with Paul of Samosata in his *Protest*, translated in this volume on pp. 559–563.

<sup>16</sup> That is, presumably, Nestorius’s *Second Letter to Cyril* and Cyril’s *Second Letter to Nestorius*, translated in this volume on pp. 570–576 and pp. 564–569.

<sup>17</sup> This synod would eventually take place in Ephesus in 431. Nestorius wrote this letter prior to the formal announcement of an ecumenical council being sent out by Emperor Theodosius II. This statement is thus no doubt intended as a reminder to Celestine of Nestorius’s proximity to the imperial court in Constantinople and his insider knowledge of palace affairs.